

Statement of

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On

Low Clearance: Why Did the Department of Defense Suddenly Stop Processing Private Sector
Security Clearances?

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, it is my privilege to testify today on behalf of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to provide you with an update of the progress that has been made to improve the timeliness of the security clearance process and reduce the backlog of background investigations.

Background

OPM's mission is to ensure the Federal Government has an effective civilian workforce. To accomplish this mission, OPM provides background investigation products and services to agencies to make security clearance or suitability decisions on civilian, as well as military and contractor personnel. OPM conducts different levels of investigations for various types of positions in the Federal Government. The investigations range from the minimum level of investigation for positions that require a Confidential or Secret clearance, to extensive field investigations for those that require a Top Secret clearance.

At OPM, the division responsible for conducting background investigations is our Federal Investigative Services Division (FISD), headquartered in Boyers, Pennsylvania. This division supports over 100 Federal agencies with thousands of security offices worldwide. Its automated processing systems and vast network of field investigators handle a high volume of cases. In fact, we expect to process over 1.7 million investigations this year.

Update on the investigation and security clearance process

Since February 20, 2005, OPM has had responsibility for about 90 percent of all personnel background investigations for the Federal government. Subsequently, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) formalized this by officially designating OPM as the lead investigative agency responsible for conducting personnel security investigations. We have been working closely with OMB and the major clearance granting agencies to meet the timeliness requirements of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Protection Act of 2004. Last Fall, when our performance improvement plan was released, it addressed four critical areas of the investigation and security clearance process: workload projections, timeliness and quality of agency submissions of investigations, investigations timeliness, and adjudications timeliness.

Since that time, I am happy to report that we have made great strides in improving overall timeliness and reducing the inventory of cases, and we are continuing to work aggressively to resolve any issues that are hindering the background investigations process.

OPM provides reports each quarter to OMB and the clearance granting agencies on the progress that has been made to meet the goals of the performance plan I referenced earlier. The reports provide data in the four focus areas I described. As an attachment to my testimony today, I am providing a chart which depicts the overall performance improvement trends for all agencies.

Workload projections: To staff the investigative program responsibly, we need agencies to work toward projecting their annual need within a margin of 5%. Overall, agencies' projections are within 17% of actual work submitted. The Department of Defense, which represents over 80% of the required security clearance investigations, has exceeded its annual projections by 59% for the first half of the fiscal year. We have asked all agencies to re-evaluate their projections for the remainder of FY2006. Based on any adjustments provided, we may need to further increase our Federal and contractor staff levels to keep pace with demand.

Timeliness and quality of agency submissions of investigations: The first step in improving the timeliness of the investigation and security clearance process is timely and accurate submission of the subject's background information to OPM. The expanded use of the electronic Questionnaires for Investigations Processing (e-QIP) by submitting agencies has improved submission timeliness and lowered the rate of submissions OPM rejects because they contain incomplete or inconsistent information. In June 2005, we reported that 27 agencies were using e-QIP and over 17,000 investigations had been requested electronically. Currently, over 50 agencies are using e-QIP and over 221,000 investigations have been requested through this process.

In April 2006, submissions through e-QIP averaged 14 days while hardcopy submissions averaged 28 days. This is an improvement over the 35 to 55 calendar days reported in November 2005, and is in line with the recommended performance goal of all submissions within 14 days. In addition, the rejection rate is currently 9%, and we are confident this number can be reduced to the performance goal of less than 5% with the expanded use of e-QIP.

Investigations Timeliness: OPM continues to make significant progress in reducing the amount of time it takes to complete the investigations for initial security clearances. Timeliness for Single Scope Background Investigations (SBI), which support initial Top Secret clearances, averaged 284 days in June 2005. In April 2006, they averaged 171 days in process. Timeliness for those designated for Priority handling were reduced from 58 days in June to 53 days in April.

Timeliness for National Agency Checks with Law Check and Credit (NACLC) investigations that support a Secret or Confidential Clearance, averaged 163 days in June 2005. In April, they averaged 145 days. Timeliness for Priority requests for this level of investigation also decreased from an average of 95 days in June to 64 days in April.

Table 1

Case Type	June 2005	October 2005	April 2006
SBI's/Priority Total	1,168	1,170	692
Average Days	58	38	53
SBI's/All Total	8,430	8,589	5,751
Average Days	284	231	171
NACLC's/Priority Total	827	908	922

Average Days	95	53	64
NACLC's/All Total	34,727	33,521	32,491
Average Days	163	134	145

The improvement in timeliness can be attributed largely to our increased staffing and productivity by our field agents. Currently, we are maintaining a staff level of over 8,600 employees devoted to the background investigations program. We expect our staffing level will reach over 9,000 by the end of this calendar year.

In addition, we began deploying field agents overseas in August 2005, and currently have more than 40 field agents working at more than 30 military installations around the world. The agents are working off the backlog of cases needing overseas coverage. We will continue to work with the Department of State and DoD to expand OPM's international presence overseas.

Although we have been able to reduce the number of overdue initial clearance investigations, our inventory of pending investigations is increasing because of the difficulty we have obtaining information from third-party record providers. The investigations cannot be closed complete until this third-party information is obtained. We continue to experience delays in obtaining information from some national, state, and local record providers. Working with OMB, Federal agencies that provide records have developed aggressive plans to improve their performance.

Adjudications Timeliness: During the second quarter of this fiscal year, agencies reported their adjudication actions to OPM on approximately 39% of their investigations. Of those reported, agencies averaged 78 days to adjudicate their investigations, with 9% done within 30 days of completion of the investigation. OPM is working with agencies to improve the time it takes to

deliver completed investigations and report their adjudicative actions. These efforts include electronically transmitting the completed investigation to the adjudications facility and linking an agency's in-house record system to OPM's data base for electronic updating of their actions.

Mr. Chairman, when the Senate confirmed OPM Director Linda Springer last summer, I know she assured Members of Congress that our work on security clearance reforms would be one of her highest priorities. I am proud to have been given the opportunity to work closely with our Director to put my own 30 years of Federal experience in this area to work in order to meet the expectations Congress and the President have set on this critical issue.

This concludes my remarks. I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.